



The Thoreau Society Bulletin

ISSN 0040-6406

Number 237

Fall 2001

Alexander Henry and Thoreau's Climb of Mount Katahdin

Victor C. Friesen

[Editor's Note: The following was first published in the Spring 1973 Bulletin. We thought it timely for reprint in this issue after yet another successful Thoreau Society sponsored trip to Katahdin in August.]

Henry Thoreau was a voracious reader of travel books. This fact has been well documented by John

Aldrich Christie in his study *Thoreau as World Traveler* (New York, 1965). One of Thoreau's favorite travel books was *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776* (New York, 1809), written by Alexander Henry (the Elder). Henry was born in New Jersey, not too far from Thoreau's own birthplace in Massachusetts, but he spent most of his life in Canada as a fur trader. He came west in 1775 along the well-known Canadian voyageurs' route from



View of Mount Katahdin from Lake Umbagog

Photo by Kathi Anderson

Montreal. Arriving at Lake Winnipeg, he traveled from it up the Saskatchewan River to Cumberland House, a rival trading post operated by the Hudson's Bay Company, and from there north a short distance to Beaver (now Amisk) Lake. From Beaver Lake he journeyed farther southwest and northwest, and these experiences form the heart of the Second Part of his *Travels*.

Thoreau's praise of Henry's account, as recorded in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,¹ is more or less unquali-

fied and suggests the value of the explorer's book to him. First of all, Thoreau admired Henry the man—someone whose travels were integral with his workaday life as a fur trader. Secondly, Thoreau was greatly interested in the three-fold description which Henry gives: of his adventures themselves, of the geography and natural history of the region, and of the

society and manners of the Indians he meets. These descriptions read like the argument of a great poem, Thoreau says, and adds that they could inspire poets for many years. Thirdly, Thoreau admires Henry's writing style. Henry "does not defer too much to literature" but writes simply "for the information of his reader, for science and for history" (I, 231). This explorer is above contemporary writing fashions, writing "not the *annals* of the

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country, but the natural facts, or *perennials*, which are ever without date" (I, 231).

Knowing Thoreau's appreciation of Henry's *Travels*, then, people acquainted with Thoreau's writings may find a paragraph from the final pages of that book to be of particular interest. It reads as follows:

In recrossing Beaver Lake, the wind obliged us to put into a bay which I had not visited before. Taking my gun, I went into the woods, in search of game; but I had not advanced more than half a mile, when I found the country almost inaccessible, by reason of masses of rock, which were scattered in all directions: some were as large as houses, and lay as if they had been first thrown into the air, and then suffered to fall into their present posture. By a circuitous route, I at last ascended the mountain, from one side of which they had fallen; the whole body was fractured, and separated by large chasms. In some places, parts of the mountain, of half an acre in surface, were raised above the general level. It was a scene for the warfare of Titans, or for that of Milton's angels!²

Although Henry's "mountain" would now be called a high rocky hill, his brief description seems very like a capsule summary of Thoreau's later account of his own

climbing of Mount Katahdin in 1846, which is described in the first chapter of *The Maine Woods*. Thoreau was familiar with Henry's narrative at the time of his writing of this excursion to Maine,³ which was first published separately in 1848. The importance that some critics have placed in Thoreau's climbing of Maine's highest mountain, in its effect upon his relationship to nature,⁴ takes on added interest if we consider that several of Thoreau's statements seem to be a prolonged echo of Henry's phrases.

On Katahdin Thoreau too is, as he says, "hemmed in by walls of rock," huge enough to be a sort of "giant's stairway" (III, 66). Henry's reference to rocks scattered about as if they had fallen from on high and then remained undisturbed anticipates Thoreau's comment: "The mountain seemed a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides" (III, 69). Henry's feeling of apparent insignificance in a "scene of the warfare of the Titans, or for that of Milton's angels!" becomes expanded in Thoreau in this sentence: "Vast, Titanic, inhuman nature has got [man] at disadvantage, caught him alone and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty" (III, 71). And Thoreau describes his own climb as "scarcely less arduous than Satan's anciently through Chaos" (III, 67); the scene reminds him of "Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus...It was vast and Titanic, and such as man never inhabits" (III, 70-71).

The description of that similar area in Saskatchewan, however, did dwell, it seems, in Thoreau's mind from his reading of the narrative of a favorite explorer, Alexander Henry. It seems too that that reading influenced his writing of the Katahdin episode.

Notes

- ¹ Thoreau, Henry David. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. 20 vols. Boston, 1906. Vol. I, 230-231. Hereafter, references to Thoreau will be made by citing volume and page number of this edition directly in the text of the essay. Vol. I is *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; Vol. III is *The Maine Woods*.
- ² Henry, Alexander. *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776*. New York: 1809. 328.
- ³ See Christie, p. 258. Also, note that in *A Week* Thoreau says he must recall Henry's book while on his own boat trip in New England, thus implying that he had read it before he sailed along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in 1839.
- ⁴ For example, John G. Blair and Augustus Trowbridge in "Thoreau on Katahdin," *American Quarterly* XII (1960), 508-517 say that Thoreau's experience on Katahdin "threatened his most basic premise" which was a "pantheistic belief that the universe was congenial to human life that that human meaning could therefore be found in nature." Loren Eiseley in *Francis Bacon and the Modern Dilemma* (Lincoln, Nebraska 1962), p. 90 says that on Katahdin Thoreau "moved for a moment in a titanic world and hurled at stone titanic questions."



Photo by Kathi Anderson

This past August marked the Thoreau Society's fifth annual excursion to Mt. Katahdin.

Twenty-one participants traveled from as far as Ohio to Baxter State Park in Maine for four days of camping, hiking, canoeing, and moose-watching.

Seven of these participants were returning for their second consecutive year.

President's Column

Ronald A. Bosco

As our editor Susie Carlisle, members of our staff, and I were preparing this issue of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* for the printer, news of the great tragedies of 11 September interrupted our work. Since the Society was about to initiate its annual appeal, I was writing a column on the concept of giving and how, through their generosity over the years, our members have always stood by the Society and insured the success of its mission. I will return to the subject of that column on another occasion, but for now I have set it aside. In its place I wish to share with you a passage from Thoreau's *Journal*; it is a passage which, like others I drew from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, I shared with my students when my University resumed classes in the days following 11 September. You see, many of my undergraduate students come from New York City and its immediate surrounding area, and for some, Thoreau's words, with their expression of confidence in the constancy of nature as represented by the cycle of the seasons, provided an unexpected degree of consolation and hope in the face of the dreadful events that they, their families, and their friends had just experienced.

As the afternoons grow shorter, and the early evening drives us home to complete our chores, we are reminded of the shortness of life, and become more pensive, at least in this twilight of the year. We are prompted to make haste and finish our work before the night comes. I leaned over a rail in the twilight on the Walden road, waiting for the evening mail to be distributed, when such thoughts visit-

ed me. I seemed to recognize the November evening as a familiar thing come round again, and yet I could hardly tell whether I had ever known it or only divined it. The November twilights just begun! It appeared like a part of a panorama at which I sat spectator, a part with which I was perfectly familiar just coming into view, and I foresaw how it would look and roll along, and prepared to be pleased. Just such a piece of art merely, though infinitely sweet and grand, did it appear to me, and just as little were any active duties required of me. We are independent of [f] all that we see. The hangman whom I have seen cannot hang me. The earth which I have seen cannot bury me. Such doubleness and distance does sight prove. Only the rich and such as are troubled with ennui are implicated in the maze of phenomena. You cannot see anything until you are clear of it. The long railroad causeway through the meadows west of me, the still twilight in which hardly a cricket was heard, the dark bank of clouds in the horizon long after sunset, the villagers crowding the post-office, and the hastening home to supper by candle-light, had I not seen all this before! What new sweet was I to extract from it? Truly they mean that we shall learn our lesson well. Nature gets thumbed like an old spelling-book. The almshouse and Frederick were still as last November. I was no nearer, methinks, nor further off from my

friends. Yet I sat the bench with perfect contentment, unwilling to exchange the familiar vision that was to be unrolled for any treasure or heaven that could be imagined.... It was as if I was promised the greatest novelty the world has ever seen or shall see, though the utmost possible novelty would be the difference between me and myself a year ago. This alone encouraged me, and was my fuel for the approaching winter. That we may behold the panorama with this slight improvement or change, this is what we sustain life for with so much effort from year to year.

And yet there is no more tempting novelty than this new November. No going to Europe or another world is to be named with it. Give me the old familiar walk, post-office and all, with this ever new self, with this infinite expectation and faith, which does not know when it is beaten. We'll go nutting once more. We'll pluck the nut of the world, and crack it in the winter evenings. Theatres and all other sightseeing are puppet-shows in comparison. I will take another walk to the Cliff, another row on the river, another skate on the meadow, be out in the first snow, and associate with the winter birds. Here I am at home. In the bare and bleached crust of the earth I recognize my friend.

1 November 1858,
Journal XI:273-75

Life Membership

The Society is once again offering life memberships.

Life Membership includes all the benefits of an individual membership with the added advantage that your contribution will be managed for the long-term benefit of the Society.

Cost: \$1,000 per person

Your Life Membership contribution is tax-deductible.
Please contact the office for further information.

(781) 259-4750



Thoreau Society in Dallas

Photographer Scot Miller and his wife, Marilyn, opened a new gallery this July in Carrollton, Texas. The *sun to moon gallery* opened its doors with Miller's exhibit of 50 limited-edition prints from *Walden Woods*. To celebrate the opening, the Millers hosted two weekend events: first with the *Walden Woods Project*, to which Miller donated a percentage of the proceeds from his *Walden* prints, and the following weekend, August 3–5, with the Thoreau Society.

Society President Ron Bosco, Executive Director Tom Harris, and Thoreau scholar Bradley P. Dean represented the Society and organized two full days of talks and presentations ranging from an introduction to the life of Thoreau to more in-depth discussions of Thoreau's views of wildness and his late natural history writings. Over one hundred Texans attended the Thoreau Society weekend at *sun to moon gallery*, including many of the Society's local members.

Several members attending the event commented that they were surprised when they received the announcement postcard to discover that the event was in Texas and not in New England. One member, a high-school science teacher, drove three hours to attend the talks. Several more were present throughout the entire weekend. Another twelve Thoreauvians became members of the Society as the result of the program.

The Society would like to thank Scot and Marilyn Miller for their hospitality and for their support of the Society and *Walden Woods*. Miller's advertising agency, Wm. S. Miller Co. Advertising, is designing the logo for the Society's new activity, *The Friends of Walden Pond*, pro bono, and is the first Corporate Protector for the Friends.

The Society hopes to continue offering programs outside of New England. If you are interested in supporting such an activity in your area, please call the Society office at (781) 259-4750. If you would like to see some of Miller's *Walden* photographs and his collection of images from Yosemite National Park, Italy, the Texas hill country, and more, please visit his website at www.suntomoon.com.

Above: Brad Dean and Ron Bosco talk with participants at the *sun to moon gallery*
Below: *Wild Fruits* editor, Brad Dean shares a copy of Thoreau's book with Shaun O'Reilly



Call for Nominations

The Awards Committee of the Thoreau Society solicits nominations for the following awards:

Thoreau Society Distinguished Achievement Award
for an accomplishment that is limited in time and scope

Walter Harding Distinguished Service Award
for accomplishments in the areas, included in the Thoreau Society's mission statement or for contributions that serve the Thoreau Society itself and/or

Thoreau Society Medal
for significant and sustained contributions that exemplify the ideals and values represented by Henry Thoreau

For more information, or to make a nomination, please contact the Awards Committee chair, Joel Myerson (myerson@gwm.sc.edu) or other members of the committee, Susie Carlisle (scarlisl@ziplink.net) or Bob Hudspeth (hudspeth@uor.edu).

The deadline for nominations is 15 February 2002.

Thank you

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If you would like to add your support to the Society's publications program, please contact Tom Harris at (781) 259-4750 or Tom.Harris@walden.org

Editor's Note

Susie Carlisle

It is difficult to find words in these days and weeks following the events of 11 September. In our individual worlds that are centered in New York or Washington D.C., or centered in places serene and seemingly tranquil, we are all jarred and unnerved and reeling as we come to grips with the acts and their aftermath. In the hills of Ashburnham, Massachusetts—the center of my life with my husband, children, and high school students at Cushing Academy—we feel eerily disconnected and yet not untouched. A former student was on board Flight 11 out of Boston; a dear friend watched the first plane hit the World Trade Center as he poured his first cup of coffee of the day.

But our lives have gone on, and in a somewhat unexpected manner, we have managed to take the worst of this event to convey a higher level of tolerance and understanding for others and their beliefs. My school is made up of a highly diverse population; 24% of the student body is from abroad, with a high percentage from the Middle East. We watched incredulously as the towers collapsed and as reports filtered in about the Pentagon and the Pennsylvania countryside. We listened to leaders expressing anger at the perpetrators. But anger was not an emotion that

emerged here. We were all deeply shocked and saddened, and our hearts ached for the victims, their families, and those who managed to survive. Instead of anger, our students and children expressed frustration for those who condemned quickly and without validity—they have learned well the ideas of acceptance and tolerance of this multicultural society in which we live.

I do not believe that these events signal the beginning of a new era, in which we trust others less and tighten our cloaks about us against all comers. I do believe that we must continue to stand firmly for tolerance and acceptance, and that we must not live our lives without principle, but let our principles guide us toward greater understanding and awareness of the world around us. Like Thoreau, "I believe in the forest and the meadow, and the night in which the corn grows." Like Thoreau, I believe "the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men." And like Thoreau, I am convinced that "one day the sun shall shine more brightly than he has ever done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn."

Annual Gathering 11–14 July 2002

The Spiritual and Political Mind of Thoreau with keynote speaker Lewis Hyde

Please send us your ideas and suggestions for speakers, programs, and activities for next year's Gathering.

Send your suggestions along with a half-page description to:

The Thoreau Society
Annual Gathering Committee
44 Baker Farm
Lincoln, MA 01773-3004

or

ThoreauSociety@walden.org

All suggestions must be received by
21 December 2001

Used Books Wanted



*Cleaning out your attic?
Simplifying your life?*

If you have used books relating to Thoreau (including Emerson, Transcendentalism, nineteenth-century New England history, etc.) please consider making a donation to the Thoreau Society.

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Cape Cod Excursion

"At length we reached the seemingly retreating boundary of the plain, and entered what had appeared at a distance an upland marsh, but proved to be dry sand covered with beach-grass, the bearberry, bayberry, shrub-oaks, and beach-plum, slightly ascending as we approached the shore; then, crossing over a belt of sand on which nothing grew, though the roar of the sea sounded scarcely louder than before, and we were prepared to go half a mile further, we suddenly stood on the edge of a bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Far below us was the beach, from half a dozen to a dozen rods in width, with a long line of breakers rushing to the strand. The sea was exceedingly dark and stormy, the sky completely overcast, the clouds still dropping rain, and the wind seemed to blow not so much as the exciting cause, as from sympathy with the already agitated ocean."

— "The Beach," *Cape Cod*

The Thoreau Society sponsored its second excursion to Cape Cod this year. Sixteen participants walked sections of the beach and woodland trails from Eastham to Provincetown on the three-day outing. Participants came from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Florida, Connecticut, New York, Georgia, and Idaho to retrace Thoreau's trip. Adam Gamble, founder of On Cape Publications and author of the popular guidebook *In the Footsteps of Thoreau: 25 Historic & Nature Walks on Cape Cod*, served as an extraordinary guide. In addition to the walks, this year's excursion included an evening conversation with award-winning author Robert Finch and local historian and wind-mill expert James Davis.

The Society is currently organizing future excursions to Cape Cod and to Quebec. The annual Katahdin Excursion will be held in August of 2002. Due to the popularity of these excursions into Thoreau Country and at the request of many members who frequently visit Massachusetts, the Society now offers free monthly excursions in and around Concord and is working to develop trips to Mt. Greylock and the White Mountains.

The Thoreau Society welcomes the following new members:

Sheila Allen, PA
Patricia Barry, MA
Mary Basham, TX
Walter Bickford, MA
E. Blumenthal, MA
Phil Bonfanti, MS
David Boroughs, WA
Joyce Bosc, MD
Nadine Breslo, CA
Janet Burne, MA
Dillon Bustin, MA
Alyson Carter, Canada
Lawrence Chapman, FL
Gail Childers, TX
Jack Childers, TX
Randall Clack, DE
Patricia Conry, MA
Mary Costabile, NJ
Kelly Cowan, ME
Kristine Dee, PA
Jared Derrick, TX
Marguerite Edwards, TX
James Elsner, Jr., CT
Ron Faraday, PA
Jan and James Ford, MA
Sharon Francis, MA
Ralph Frongillo, MA
Ed Glomski, OH
Richard Granville, MD
Kevin Griffiths, Australia
Barbara Hagan, MA
Stephen Hahn, NJ
Kevin Hart, MA
Stefanie Haug and family, MA
Jane Henderson, NJ
Tom Hepburn, AZ
Thomas Hetzel, Ph.D., TX
Gina Hewes, MD
Glenn ImObersteg, CA

Ray Kappel, NE
Bruce Keeney, NY
Jan Kelley, TX
Thomas and Lucia Knoles, MA
Hilary Krivchenia, IN
John Kucich, MA
Mark Lambertus, IN
Jeffrey Madura and family, IL
Janice Maragakis, TX
Stephen Masters, IL
Randall and Arlene Miller, ID
Robert Moldenhauer, MI
Gayle Moore, IN
Dianne Olson, MA
Shaun O'Reilly, TX
Matt Parish, MA
Doug Parish, OH
Florinda Peck, MA
Jamie Pietruska, MA
Ana Recarte, Spain
Susan Roberts, FL
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Patricia Stange, NY
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Agnes Wyant, MA
J. William Youngs, WA

The Thoreau Society Staff would like to thank the following
Society members who generously donated their time to help with
the *Summer Bulletin* mailing:

Helene Cohen, Thomas Dawkins, Brad Dean, Debra Kang Dean,
Greta Eckhardt, Dave Ganoe, John Mack, Lorna Mack, Ken Voorhees,
Laura Dassow Walls, Joe Wheeler

The Life You've Imagined

Darren A. Diviak

[Editor's Note: The Bulletin is in the process of contacting American General Financial Group for an opportunity to reply to Mr. Diviak's article.]

A phone rings. A pensive man with runaway hair and chasing sideburns adjusts his headset. "Thank you for calling Quietly Desperate Investments," he sings, "my name is Henry Thoreau, how may I help you?"

"I need some help living the life I've imagined," the caller responds.

"Is this the life where you invest wisely, retire from your miserable job, and spend your golden years in a big house on a hill?"

"That's the one, Henry! How did you know?"

"Just a hunch. Anyway, let me tell you about our exciting investment packages."

Thereafter, Henry strings the phone line with pearls of financial wisdom, informing the ever-grateful caller about annuities, mutual funds, and diversified portfolios.

For those who have actually read Henry David Thoreau's essays, this scenario is absurd. The nineteenth-century transcendentalist would have had little interest in helping acquisitive investors. Yet this is what the American General Financial Group would have us believe. The financial services giant has used a popular passage from Thoreau's *Walden* in its television ad campaign, and in so doing, has drafted Thoreau's spirit (kicking and screaming, no doubt) into its service.

American General launched the campaign during the first game of the 1998 World Series and the spots have blanketed the airwaves since. In each, successful people parade across the television screen to inspirational music while a friendly voice-over boasts that American General has helped many Americans achieve their financial dreams. Then, at the commercial's conclusion, this somewhat familiar paraphrase appears:

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams,

Live the life you've imagined.

—Henry Thoreau."

The implication, of course, is that viewers who purchase AG's financial ser-

"American General Financial Group...has used a popular passage from Thoreau's Walden in its television ad campaign, and in so doing, has drafted Thoreau's spirit (kicking and screaming, no doubt) into its service."

vices will eventually accumulate enough money to withdraw from the rat race and lead Thoreauvian lives.

But it seems American General's copywriters "labored under a mistake" (Thoreau 3). They assumed that their company and Thoreau share identical missions simply because both seek to liberate Americans from mindless labor. Thoreau complained that most people, "even in this comparatively free country...are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them" (Thoreau 3). And American General suggests that its advisors can help customers pluck these finer fruits through moneyed investments. But this is where the tenuous link between American General and its would-be spokesman breaks irrevocably, for while Thoreau and American General share similar ends, their means are diametrically opposed. If AG's advertising executives had gone to the trouble of even browsing Thoreau's prose, they would have realized this.

To Thoreau, money and material possessions were quite unnecessary to taste life's finer fruits. In fact, he argued that the wealthier people are, the less freedom they enjoy. Just a few pages into *Walden*, he pities America's financially secure as the "most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross...and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters" (Thoreau 10). Similarly, in "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau explains that the "opportunities of living are diminished in proportion as what are called the 'means' are increased" (Thoreau 236). Apparently the folks at

American General missed these passages. AG also claims to specialize in "retirement plans" ("American General"). The corporation can help you accumulate gold for the golden years. But Thoreau roundly criticized the notion of earning toward retirement. He mused: "This spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once" (Thoreau 36).

We can only hope that advertisers will one day "go up garret" and study the people they quote in their ads. If they cared for contextual accuracy as much as they care for selling, they would do this. Too often, copywriters "borrow" an author's words without regard for his or her intent. As American General's misuse of *Walden* illustrates, this "borrowing" allows advertisers to shroud a company and its products in a mirage of cerebral authority that is entirely unjustified. And this does a great disservice to the ads' unwitting consumers. In addition to giving them the mistaken impression that Thoreau actually cared about high returns, it gives them the mistaken impression that American General's advisors are bookish intellectuals, and by extension, good researchers and analysts. Thus, they appear to be safe people with whom to leave your hard-earned dollars. In fact, American General's financial advisors could be among the industry's best. It is entirely possible that their research and analysis of financial matters is second to none. But the company's ability to accurately interpret literature is sorely lacking and it should be held accountable for this.

What is perhaps most disturbing about AG's misquoting of Thoreau is that, if the campaign continues, those unfamiliar with *Walden*'s original author will come to associate "Live the Life You've Imagined" with the American General Financial Group. AG has facilitated this faulty association on its internet site. The Thoreauvian phrase turns up repeatedly on its web pages, usually accompanied by American General's corporate logo, yet often with no acknowledgement of

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Thoreau's authorship. One has to suffer through an obscure portion of the site, which details American General's rise to financial triumph, before Thoreau is credited with authorship of the phrase. In fact, he is barely credited at all. American General simply tells us about their smashingly successful ad campaign, which was "inspired by" Henry David Thoreau, and is "designed to support the company's branding initiative and better communicate how American General helps customers 'Live the Lives They've Imagined'" ("Leadership" 5).

How Thoreau inspired anything supporting a "branding initiative" is truly a mystery. Indeed, a brief look at some of the mutual funds distributed by American General indicates that the organization could not have been inspired by anything Thoreau had to say. Thoreau sanctified nature, yet AG's International Equity Fund, for example, is heavily invested in corporations whose products perennially threaten the environment: Royal Dutch Petroleum, BP Amoco, and Toyota Motor Corporation ("Equity" 3). Thoreau was leery of technology and "modern improvements," declaring that with them, "there is not always a positive advance" (Thoreau 35). Yet like many other financial services companies, American General has a Science & Technology Fund with millions invested in electronics, computers, and telecommunications ("Science" 1). Perhaps as homage to its unwitting spokesman, American General distributes a "Socially Responsible Fund." This fund avoids investing in companies that are "significantly engaged in the production of nuclear energy, the manufacture of weapons, . . . or production of products that significantly pollute the environment" ("Socially Responsible" 1; emphasis added). If Thoreau were alive today, one might imagine him investing the profits from his bean field in this enviro-friendly fund. And with the money American General helped him to accumulate, he could expand his tiny cabin with the comfort of knowing that the corporations he subsidized hadn't "significantly" polluted his lungs, his pond, or his soul. But this of course is unlikely; Thoreau would have found any amount of pollution significant.

It is worth noting a final discrepancy between American General's message and the person who ostensibly inspired it.

Thoreau would have scoffed at AG's contention that it has "helped" 12 million Americans "move confidently in the direction of their dreams" ("Annual Report 2000" 2). A Yankee individualist, he was eager to share with the world his insight that an ideal life was one of self-reliance. Thus, the idea of individuals reaching their dreams with a corporation's guidance would have been difficult for him to fathom. Evidence for this abounds in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*. In it, Thoreau presents a ledger for his two-year sojourn in the woods. (The suits at AG might call this Henry's biannual report.) He does so to demonstrate neither his bookkeeping acumen nor an obsession with finances, but to show how few assets (and therefore outside sponsors) are required to "advance confidently" to one's dreams. That is truly the good news of *Walden*. It reminds us that the money and financial advice, which American General views as essential to a dreamy life, are actually quite superfluous.

In any event, the person who "inspired" the words "Live the Life You've Imagined" is now irrelevant, for American General has begun to claim legal ownership of the phrase. On the back cover of its 1999 Annual Report, the Group placed a service mark symbol next to Thoreau's wisdom—in effect to warn all readers that the phrase is the intellectual property of the American General Corporation. ("Annual Report 1999"). Perhaps American General feels that its ownership of the phrase is justified, since its copywriters tweaked Thoreau's words to accommodate our modern penchant for gender-neutral pronouns. Whatever the case, in AG's scheme of things, Thoreau has become a mere pitchman who could turn a phrase. Its capitalist mill has regressed the rugged individual into an organization man, and his sincere wisdom into a trite slogan.

As consumers, we must police this disregard for a writer's ownership and intent more effectively. Citizens require irresponsible drivers to revisit traffic school. Perhaps consumers should compel misquoting copywriters to revisit literature class. In such a class, the crude brains behind American General's campaign might have found this less familiar passage from *Walden*, and they would have promptly looked elsewhere for a marketing slogan:

The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. The town's poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any

(Thoreau 219).

This is Thoreau in his true context—extolling the richness of poverty, nature, and simple independence. Notwithstanding American General's warm and fuzzy ads, I will go confidently in this direction.

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The Thoreau Society as Oxymoron; or, the Paradoxes of Individualism

Wesley T. Mott

During an especially contentious annual meeting of the Thoreau Society several years ago, Richard Lebeaux turned to me and commented wryly, “‘Thoreau Society’ is an oxymoron.” We have always been a rich assortment of environmentalists, political activists, literary scholars, idealistic students, or simply the curious. Those with various agendas regularly take the floor at our Gathering—some are noble activists, some merely posturers, but all seek a sympathetic public forum or hope to garner a formal endorsement of their single issue from our venerable organization. And of course we submit to the annual diatribe alleging that (whatever that year’s issue) in being a “society,” we inevitably have strayed from the spirit of individualism and thus betrayed the legacy of Henry Thoreau.

Setting aside for the moment the ultimate paradox that those who wrap themselves in Thoreau’s mantle cannot be said to be truly Thoreauvian individualists (he wished no imitators and had several more lives to lead himself), this matter is worth revisiting continually because as a “Thoreau Society” we do embrace paradoxes.

The charge at recent annual gatherings is that the Society has been corporatized to an unhealthy degree—that we have left behind the simple, virtuous days when our “home” was the Lyceum and our Board (primarily an honorary one comprised of past presidents) conducted its business over lemonade for an hour on Friday afternoon. Now we have a larger and more complex Board that meets twice a year for several days (and continually “meets” over email); vice presidents of major activities; an elaborate committee structure; and a daunting set of bylaws. Where in this corporate web is the individualistic spirit of Henry Thoreau?

The answer, it seems to me, is rooted both in history and in the present. As Emerson, Thoreau, and all but the most eccentric Transcendentalists knew full well, *individualism* and *self-reliance* are not absolutes but qualities needing careful examination. The Romantic individualism exemplified by Goethe, Wordsworth, and

Coleridge inspired the American Transcendentalist commitment to self-culture and the great reform movements of the day. Individualism was the very spine of Concord’s moral climate. But without restraint, nineteenth-century individualism perverted many of the most precious democratic values. In economics, the noble principles of entrepreneurship and free trade *unchecked* became rapacious exploitation of people and resources. In politics, democratic individualism *unchecked* became the hypocritical racist policies toward slavery and “Indian removal” of the “common man’s” president, Andrew Jackson; on the world stage, a haunting legacy of destruction had been left by the age’s great individualist hero who turned out to be the ultimate amoral liar, opportunist, and egotist—Napoleon. Individualism, the Transcendentalists knew, was Janus-faced.

Today we perhaps mispronounce Thoreau’s own trademark phrase “civil disobedience.” In the wake of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King, the great moral authority of this reform stance seems to derive less from the autonomous, even anarchic gesture of *disobedience* than from its *civil* context and purpose: A means of witnessing to the truth, “civil disobedience” aims to recall the community to a truth it has lost sight of or turned from. Requiring self-sacrifice and not self-aggrandizement, civil disobedience can be a revelation to the individual (as Thoreau learned during his night in jail) but it is finally about *social* reform.

The dialectic of freedom and restraint, of solitude and society—a central theme for Emerson and Thoreau—is deeply rooted in American history. As early as the Mayflower Compact, New England settlers knew that survival depended on binding the most intensely personal spiritual longings to a covenant. In “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630) John Winthrop told emigrants bound for these shores that without “mutual consent” individual dreams are doomed. A century and a half later, James Madison championed the Bill of Rights but feared that “faction” would be the canker that would eat away the core of the new republic. Subsequent idealists

and reformers inescapably have faced this dialectic. As Donald Worster stated in his keynote address “Thoreau and the American Passion for Wilderness” before the Thoreau Society on 14 July 2001, meaningful land preservation has been achieved not by purists scornful of process but by those willing to dirty their hands in politics, willing to negotiate hard behind the scenes to hammer out enduring policies.

These historical precedents bear directly on the life of the Thoreau Society: A new member rose during the 2001 annual meeting, announcing that the struggle to save the papers of Jack Kerouac has been lost, that this literary treasure is to be scattered to private collections of the highest bidders. The loss to admirers and students of Kerouac is deep and irreparable.

For me, this announcement triggered memories of other lost battles. Many of us over the decades learned despair as idealistic congressional and presidential candidates were crushed by cynicism and big money, as historic buildings went under the wrecking ball and open spaces were paved for strip malls. Just ten years ago it seemed inevitable that condominiums and an office park (talk of oxymorons!) had arrived within yards of Walden Pond.

But we in the Thoreau Society have special cause to rejoice because—with a shared, vigilant sense of stewardship—we *have learned how to win such battles!* For the past decade, under the successive leadership of Joel Myerson, Beth Witherell, and Ron Bosco, with the hard work of a diverse Board of Directors, committees, and members, and with the overwhelming support of the membership, the Thoreau Society has built a sense of “mutual consent” as the best means to further the ideals of Henry Thoreau. We have responsibly immersed our personal passions (even our love of simplicity!) in details of finances, management, contracts, and law. And see what we have achieved! By lending our support to talented and dedicated individuals such as Don Henley and Kathi Anderson who know how to organize and raise crucial funds, we have had a small hand in saving the very woods Thoreau loved. By forming a partnership with the Walden Woods Project we have

continued on page 10

continued from page 9

had a major part in *keeping intact* the world's greatest collection of Thoreauviana and establishing a great library. By managing our funds wisely we now operate a Shop that has sold tens of thousands of copies of *Walden* alone, and we have a small, dedicated, and skilled professional staff led by Tom Harris that creates a richer, more stimulating Annual Gathering each year. By joining forces with the Department of Environmental Management, we are about to become major stewards of the very shores of Walden Pond.

No, I don't miss the days of high-minded hand-wringing and lost causes. We can all be proud to be part of a Society that has yoked the strong individualism of its many hundreds of members to a common purpose, and in so doing is having a widening, deepening, and permanent effect on both the spirit and the world in which Henry Thoreau lived and moved and had his being. Yes, the Thoreau Society is a living oxymoron. But we are making it work.

Accessing the Thoreau Society Collections

Contact Jeff Cramer,
Curator of Collections
at the Thoreau Institute
M–F 10 a.m.–4 p.m.

(781) 259-4730 or cura-
tor@walden.org

For an online catalog and
finding aids, visit our

Web site at:

www.walden.org/institute

Notes and Queries

Jeff Cramer informs us that on the October 11th episode of CBS's forensic science mystery drama, the detective confronted the suspect (a professor of philosophy) with Thoreau's "Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk."

The New Hampshire Humanities Council sponsored "Chautauqua: History Comes Alive!" from July 30 – August 2 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The theme of the event was "Progress and Preservation: American Environmental Choices." Participants were invited to "meet" six legendary Americans with differing perspectives on "our relationship with the world around us." Of course, among those on hand was Henry David Thoreau, who participated in an evening session with Rachel Carson on August 1. Thoreau and Carson were also on hand for a "Breakfast with the Scholars" the following morning.

A cartoon in the 6 August 2001 issue of *The New Yorker* shows a young couple picnicking on a hilltop covered with grass and wildflowers. The young woman is pecking away on a laptop. Her companion, looking over her shoulder, comments "Whoa! Move over, Thoreau."

Jack Barrett enthused about the 22-26 August performances at California State University, Sacramento entitled "Thoreau's *Walden*: To Live Life." A one-man theatrical event, William Powers (as Thoreau) spends the evening in his cabin explaining why he built it. The dialogue is based on *Walden* and other writings.

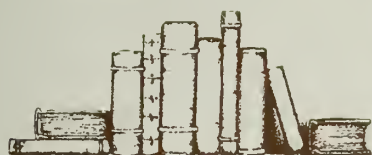
The 15 July issue of the *Boston Globe* included a lengthy article titled "Rethinking Thoreau." Reporter Michael Kranish quotes Lincoln-Sudbury High School history teacher Bill Schechter and Thoreau scholar Brad Dean in the piece focusing on the teaching of *Walden* at the high school and college level.

The Thoreau Society would like to extend its condolences to the family of Mary Sherwood, a member of the Thoreau Society, who died on July 29. She was 95 years old.

Mary (Pasco) Sherwood, 95, of Storrs, died Sunday, (July 29, 2001) at Mansfield Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation where she had resided for the last five years. She was born in Hartford in 1906. Completing her Bachelor's degree at the University of Connecticut, she graduated from the forestry program in 1934. She continued her education at Cornell University and graduated in 1937 with a Master's degree in wildlife management. In 1944, Mary found employment as the first woman forester in Wisconsin. Her intense interest in Thoreau caused her to move to Concord, MA, in 1958, where she was active in the Thoreau Society. Throughout her life, Mary's love of wildflowers surrounded her, from the creation of the Wildflower and Fern Nursery in Connecticut to the Thoreau Wild Garden Nursery in Greenfield, ME, where she earned her nickname "Wildflower Mary." She was also instrumental in establishing the Albert E. Moss Forest, Wildflower and Wildlife Sanctuary on 157 acres of University of Connecticut owned land in 1990. Through a generous donation from Mary to the Mansfield Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation, a wildflower garden along their nature trail will be dedicated in honor of her and her love for wildflowers.

Published in the Hartford Courant on 8/1/2001.





Additions to the Thoreau Bibliography

Susie Carlisle

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- . "Henry David Thoreau 1817-62." *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Environment*. Ed. Joy A. Palmer. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. 106-113.

We are grateful for the contributions made to the bibliography by M. Berger, M. Harding, B. Dean, and R. Winslow III. Please continue to keep Susie Carlisle informed of any items missed and new items as they appear at, 44 Baker Farm, Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773-3004; e-mail scarlisl@ziplink.net; fax (978) 827-3162. Whenever possible, include a copy of the book, article, or other item so that it can be preserved in the Thoreau Society's collection at the Thoreau Institute.

The Transcendentalist Ed Glomski

Superfluous money buys superfluous goods,
So he's simplified his life, moved into the woods.
My friend Henry, sinewy and lean,
Chops up firewood and hoes down beans.

I know him as a scholar and a poet as well,
The celestial empire is inside his wooden cell.
A surveyor, an author and transcendentalist,
I see him as he saunters in the morning in the mist.

Some think him but a hermit, they do not see beyond,
A quaint little dwelling on the shore of the pond,
Or see him the victim of a strange mental quirk,
Which makes him waste his talents and shy away from work.

But they are mistaken...time will wear them away,
The money-grabbers with their hands out, waiting for their pay,
For I, the Eye of Ages, know of Henry more than they,
Architect of castles in the air, where they will always stay.

His insight, like a bright light, shining through the sylvan night,
Will instruct truth-seekers, and help freedom-fighters fight,
Wise men will revere him, all the world around.
Little bean farmer Henry, hoeing the ground.

Attention Professors:

The Society is looking for college students (graduate or undergraduate) doing excellent work on Thoreau to present their work at the 2002 Annual Gathering. The theme will be: "The Spiritual and Political Mind of Thoreau." To nominate a student, please send his or her name along with a short description of his or her status and field of interest no later than

December 21 to:

Tamara Beams
The Thoreau Society
44 Baker Farm
Lincoln, MA 01773-3004

or

Tamara.Beams@walden.org

Online Membership Directory

At the request of members wishing to get in touch with other members, you are now able to access the membership directory online at www.walden.org. If you wish to have your name and information removed from the online directory, please send an email to

ThoreauSociety@walden.org or call the Society office at (781) 259-4750.

Calendar of Events

NOVEMBER

Massachusetts

16 Friday 7:30 p.m.

FRIENDS OF WALDEN POND RECEPTION

Thoreau Institute (Lincoln, MA)

Join us as we celebrate the formation of The Friends of Walden Pond, an activity of the Thoreau Society to support the Walden Pond State Reservation. Walden Pond Supervisor Denise Morrissey will speak on the current state of Walden Pond and what challenges lie ahead.

Special guests Edward O. Wilson and Robert D. Richardson, Jr. will be presented with The Thoreau Society Medal and The Thoreau Society Distinguished Service Award respectively. For reservations, contact the office at (781) 259-4750.

17 Saturday 10:00 a.m.

THOREAU & THE WALDEN BEAN FIELD

A Thoreau Society Excursion

Bradley P. Dean, Media Center Director, The Thoreau Institute

Part of the Thoreau Society's excursion program "I have traveled a great deal in Concord" featuring monthly walks in and around Concord, Massachusetts. Space is limited. To reserve a spot and for information on where to meet, contact The Thoreau Society at (781) 259-4750 or online at www.walden.org/society.

18 Sunday 1 p.m.

"WAKING TO LIGHT"

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE GANOE WITH QUOTATIONS FROM HENRY D.

THOREAU a reception at the Tsongas Gallery, Walden Pond State Reservation

An open house reception with the photographer, Dave Ganoë. Free and open to the public. Refreshments served. Parking in main parking lot.

"Waking to Light" will be on exhibit through 28 December. A portion of the proceeds from the sales of framed prints will go directly to the Friends of Walden Pond. For more information, please call (781) 259-4750.

DECEMBER

Massachusetts

1 Saturday 10:00 a.m.

THE RIVER AND THE RAILROAD

A Thoreau Society Excursion

Jayne Gordon, Education Program Director, The Thoreau Institute

Part of the Thoreau Society's excursion program "I have traveled a great deal in Concord" featuring monthly walks in and around

Concord, Massachusetts. Space is limited. To reserve a spot and for information on where to meet, contact The Thoreau Society at (781) 259-4750 or online at www.walden.org/society.

2 Sunday 12-4 p.m.

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

The Tsongas Gallery and Shop at Walden Pond

Finish (or begin) your holiday shopping at the Shop at Walden Pond and Tsongas Gallery. Many gift items are available as well as prints on display in the gallery. Save 10% on all purchases from 23 November through 23 December (Society members save an additional 10%). Refreshments served.

JANUARY

Massachusetts

12 Saturday 10:00 a.m.

A WINTER WALK AT WALDEN POND

A Thoreau Society Excursion

Steve Carlin, Walden Pond State Reservation

Part of the Thoreau Society's excursion program "I have traveled a great deal in Concord" featuring monthly walks in and around Concord, Massachusetts. Space is limited. To reserve a spot and for information on where to meet, contact The Thoreau Society at (781) 259-4750 or online at www.walden.org/society.

25 Friday 7:30 p.m.

THE THOREAU COMMUNITY LECTURE SERIES

Robert Hudspeth on Ellery Channing

This is the first in the lecture series, "Character References: Considering Thoreauvian Values" cosponsored by the Thoreau Society, Concord Museum, and Thoreau Institute. Throughout the series, presenters and participants will investigate a sampling of the unusual individuals whose character traits caught Thoreau's attention. Free and open to the public. For more information call (978) 369-9763.

Hudspeth is a Professor of English at the University of Redlands in California. He has written a study of Ellery Channing (1973); edited the *Letters of Margaret Fuller* (6 vols. 1983-94), and is now editing Thoreau's correspondence for the Princeton edition.

Please let us know of any upcoming events in your area (reading groups, lectures, etc.).

We will list your Thoreau-related event in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* and on our Web calendar at www.walden.org

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The *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, published quarterly by the Thoreau Society, is indexed in *American Humanities Index* and *MLA International Bibliography*.

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Assistant Editor, Tamara Beams
Graphic Designer/Illustrator, Karen Merrill

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Established in 1941, The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an international nonprofit organization with a mission to honor Henry David Thoreau by stimulating interest in and fostering education about his life, works, and philosophy and his place in his world and ours, by coordinating research on his life and writings, by acting as a repository for Thoreauviana and material relevant to Henry David Thoreau, and by advocating for the preservation of Thoreau Country. Membership in the Society includes subscriptions to its two publications, *The Concord Saunterer* (published each autumn) and *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* (published quarterly). Society members receive a ten percent discount on all merchandise purchased from the Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond and advance notice about Society programs, including the Annual Gathering. Contact the Thoreau Society administrative offices in Lincoln, Massachusetts, for membership information (address below).

Communications relating to *The Concord Saunterer* should be addressed to Richard Schneider, Department of English and Modern Languages, Wartburg College, 222 Ninth Street NW, Waverly, IA 50677; tel: (319) 352-8435; e-mail: schneider@wartburg.edu.

Inquiries about merchandise (including books and mail-order items) should be directed to Jon Fadiman, Manager, the Thoreau Society Shop at Walden Pond, 915 Walden Street, Concord, MA 01742-4511, U.S.A.; tel: (781) 259-4770; fax: (978) 287-5620; e-mail: Shop@walden.org.

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